



In Pursuit of Faithful Discernment

Acts 15:1-12, Matthew 5:5

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When I was in seminary, I took a preaching class that required us to write and deliver sermons not only in the classroom setting, but also to find opportunity to preach in a local church setting. At the time, I was working at a church near my alma mater in Southwest Virginia, in the hills of the Blue Ridge. The pastor there gave me the opportunity to preach a few times when she was out on vacation. I remember one of the first times I preached, I had an elderly woman come up to me on her way out of the church and offer this feedback, she said, “I wish I could tell you that was a good sermon, but my ears don’t hear as fast as you talk.”

She continued, “I’ve never heard a southern boy speak as fast as you.”

For the next few years, I would write the word *SLOW* at the top of every page of my sermons to remind me to be cognizant of my pace. Perhaps some think I should still be doing that today.

I am aware that my pace of speech is generally faster than the average person. That’s not just something that is true about my pace of sermon delivery, but is true of my everyday vernacular. Trying to make excuse for my tempo of speech, I joke that my pace of speech is not simply fast, it’s expedient. See, if everyone listened as fast as I talk, well, the world would be much more productive, and worship would probably be 10 to 15 minutes shorter.

Isn’t it interesting how we defend ourselves in this way? When criticized, or perhaps just when we identify those things that are different in us from others, we find a way to claim that who we are, how we act, how we think, is what’s normal and best. We want others to acclimate to who we are, because clearly we are, or know, best, as if there’s any one set of beliefs, gifts, traits, or stature that makes a person “best.”

This is the premise behind genetic mutation. Evolutionary biologists experiment with genetic mutation all the time, trying to produce the best genetic version of whatever animal or plant they are working with. Rev. Rob Lough, a Methodist colleague who pastors in Fredricksburg, offers a story about Dr. William Muir, who works in the Department of Agriculture at Purdue University. In the 1990s, Dr. Muir experimented with chickens in an attempt to create more productive hens – that is, hens who laid more eggs. He set up hens in groups of 9, and at the end of each laying season, he would pull out the hen who had laid the most eggs. His theory? “If egg-laying is a heritable trait, then the experiment should produce a strain of better egg layers.”ⁱ

After a few generations of selecting the best egg-laying hens, what he ended up with was a cage of nine psychopathic hens, which pecked each other to death. Literally – six of the nine were killed by another. What he found was that the best egg layer in each batch was the biggest bully, “who achieved her productivity by suppressing the productivity of the other hens.”ⁱⁱ

I don't know about you, but to me, that doesn't seem a distant narrative from what's going on in our society today. Whether a pedestrian behavior, like speaking fast, or a statistical measurable, like egg laying, it seems what we have become as a nation is a hen house of egotistical chickens trying to peck each other to death. It seems that some want this grand experiment, called America, to be little more than a breeding group for a super-race of hyper-productive, beautiful specimens, where in there is no place for those who look, think, act, or believe differently. I think such a national identity was tested before, and the Axis was defeated.

To help us identify how we, specifically as people who are called, redeemed, and empowered by Christ, can help enact change into this type of "the best win out" society, we're seeking instruction from Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount. Instead of looking at the beatitudes as individual commands, we are considering them as a process of discipleship. By becoming more faithful disciples, we can *Be the Change* the world needs.

The last two weeks we named that Christ calls us first to be poor in spirit – to name our brokenness and inability to save ourselves. And second, we named that the natural response to admitting our brokenness is to mourn. We mourn not only for our personal brokenness, but for the brokenness of society, acknowledging that only through the power of God are we able to receive salvation, and find new life.

Today, we read the next step in the process, found in Matthew 5:5, wherein Christ says, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

The word *meek* is an interesting word – one I think we often misunderstand. Because our societal norms do not regularly reward meekness, we tend to think of the term *meek* with descriptors that go unpraised. We say *meek* is another word for little or small, referring to it in terms of having an insignificant stature. Or, we refer to meek with words like weak and emaciated, as if meekness is defined by a lack of strength. Or, perhaps we define meekness as nonconfrontational, claiming meekness to be a descriptor for lacking personal fortitude.

None of these capture the depth of the Greek intent. The word we translate as *meek* here in Matthew 5:5 is *prāys* (*prah-ooce*). In the Biblical text, the meek – the *prāys* are those who rely fully on God, rather than relying on their own strength to defend against injustice. It was people who had a disposition of the spirit that accepted God's will for us as good. Biblically, meekness is descriptive of those who, instead of inflicting upon others their own desires or expecting other to trust in their personal ways, they relied fully on God's goodness and trusted God's control over a situation.

Unlike the descriptors we might normally use for *meek*, which make meekness sound like an attitude of resignation, the Biblical invitation is to see meekness as a resilient attitude of seeking God's way. That is, meekness is a resiliency of humility.

If we can name our poverty of spirit – admitting that we don't have all the answers ... and then we can mourn our brokenness – grieving over who we are as a broken people ... then the next step is to be blessed in meekness, acknowledging that God will provide. When we name our poverty of spirit, mourn our brokenness, we find that our meekness – our humility toward God and one another – allows for us to see God's presence in more places and in more people. It decreases our limited

understanding of the world as if only we (and our kind) know best, and invites us to see the empowerment of the Spirit in the people and world around us.

We find a good example of meekness demonstrated in our text in Acts 15.

To understand what's happening in Acts 15, it would benefit us to quickly recall what happened in Acts 11. After the birth of the church, the conversion of people into this new faith in Christ as Lord took place from within the Jewish community. In Acts 11, there is a debate about whether or not Gentiles – those outside the Jewish community – should even be allowed in this new faith community. Standing before the elders in Jerusalem, Peter tells about a wild dream involving a large sheet coming down from heaven with all the animals of the earth represented on it. As the dream ended, three Gentiles knocked on his door, claiming an angel had sent them to find him. He went with them to the house of a Gentile, and as he began to speak with them, he saw the Spirit fall upon the Gentiles. The Jewish leaders were silenced at his story, and then they praised God saying, “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.”

In chapter 11, we find that the elders stood opposed to the admission of Gentiles into the church *in principle*; turning to chapter 15 we find that the argument has changed. Now, the issue is in *terms of admission* for Gentiles.ⁱⁱⁱ

A group of Jewish disciples has been sent from the homeland of Judea to this community of Gentile converts, which is being led by Paul and Barnabas. They have been sent with a message, “If you are not following the customary laws of circumcision, you cannot be saved.” They were willing to let Gentiles in to the church, but only if they maintained adherence to the law of Torah. This faith – our faith – began among the Jewish faithful, and their argument at the time was, “If Gentiles [are going to be] within the story of Israel, then their bodies must be brought into conformity.”^{iv} In other words, if you're going to be a Christian, then you must first become a Jew.

While still there in Gentile territory, Paul and Barnabas took up on the side of the Gentiles, contending against such a claim for circumcision, and we're told there is “no small dissention and debate among them.” Clearly the matter was not to be resolved, so Paul, Barnabas, and some others from the community were sent to Jerusalem to take up their case with the apostles and elders – the leaders of this new faith, who were all from within the Jewish community.

On the way to Jerusalem, they passed through Phoenicia and Samaria, and along the way, they encountered and saw many Gentiles who were converted to faithfulness in Christ.

As they reach Jerusalem, they were welcomed and they told stories of what God was doing amidst the Gentiles. But some of the believers who were present – a sect of the Pharisees – stood up among the body and said, “It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.” ... Imagine, it's like there's a party taking place, where everyone is celebrating how many people are coming to know God's love throughout the region, even among the Gentiles, and then Aunt Debbie ... Debbie Downer ... stands up and says, “sorry to ruin your fun, but I don't think they're really Christians because they aren't maintaining all the laws of Torah.” So much for the fun.

The party is put on hold and the apostles and elders met together to consider the matter. They debated among themselves. Seemingly, even among the leadership of this new church, there was

dissenting regarding the circumcision of the Gentiles. Amidst their debate, Peter stands up – Peter, the rock of the church – and he offers, ‘My brothers, you know that I made a choice to go forth and to speak God’s word to these new believers. And God said they were welcome in the faith by gifting them the Holy Spirit, just as he had to us. In doing so, in cleansing their hearts and outpouring the Spirit upon them, God made no distinction between them and us. So, why are you putting up a distinction that God has made clear does not exist? Do we not all agree that we are saved only through the grace of the Lord Jesus? So will they be.’”

The elders had a vision of what was right, and Peter was among them. There’s a reason Peter calls them *brothers* – he was one of them. Peter was of like mind and spirit; he was a Jewish convert to faithfulness in Christ as Lord. Yet, in his meekness, in his humility before God, he was able to acknowledge that God’s way was better than his way, that God’s witness was truer than his expectation of God’s witness, and that God’s work trumped his limited expectation of God’s work. This is a vision of meekness that is proclaimed throughout the Biblical text, from the prophets to the epistles. As Isaiah and Paul both proclaim, “God’s ways are not our ways; God’s thoughts are not our thoughts.”

God’s actions through the Spirit require us to have a new understanding of God’s engagement and will for the world. Acts 15 is just one example. “In this case, the literal words of one passage [from the Torah] were trumped by the subtext of other passages – God’s desire to save all people – and by God’s own action. The requirement of circumcision was supplanted by the Holy Spirit’s work in the lives of people who had long been considered excluded.”^v

Meekness is just the next step of faithfulness. It follows our admittance that we are broken, and that we don’t have the right answers. It follows our mourning, grieving how broken we have become because we’ve tried to insist that our way is the right way. Meekness is then putting into action the mental and spiritual truth that while we are broken, and that while we don’t have the right answers, God does. Meekness is the ability to put trust in God that trumps the trust we have in ourselves. Meekness is the humility before the Almighty, wherein we find new life not just for ourselves, but for all of creation.

If we want to see a change in the world, in our society, within our church, then we must *Be the Change*. We must follow in the footsteps of the early church leaders who were willing to acknowledge that even amidst their rigid belief, God’s will is divine. We must be willing to see that God is still at work in our world, and our call as part of God’s people is to humble ourselves before God’s glory, and to join in the work of God making such eternal love known.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

ⁱ William M. Muir and Davis Sloan Wilson. “When the Strong Outbreed the Weak: An Interview with William Muir.” July 11, 2016. Evolution-institute.org. Retrieved January 31, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Carl R. Holladay. *Acts: A Commentary, The New Testament Library*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

^{iv} Willie James Jennings. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible: Acts*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

^v Frank L. Crouch. Workingpreacher.org. Retrieved January 31, 2019.